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ABSTRACT

A writing instructor recalls that her own early literacy experiences were inextricably tied to particular times and places, and to the ideologies mediated by familiar institutions--schools, libraries, home. Students' literacy development is thus shaped by what some psychologists refer to as "developmental environments." In recent years, a number of developmental psychologists have argued that the nature and course of cognitive development are profoundly affected by their cultural and social settings. According to Urie Bronfenbrenner, cognitive development does not just happen automatically, but is a result of how an individual comes to terms with an environment. This environmental perspective has arisen partly as a critique of theories based on developmental stages, particularly Piagetan theory. While stage theorists tend to assume a universal (and therefore normative) developmental path and endpoint, theorists like Bronfenbrenner are not interested in prescribing what development is "supposed" to look like. Despite the many developments in composition theory in recent years, most college composition classes have largely failed to reconceive of texts as integral to contexts. The new focus on "process" may be seen as just another set of basic developmental formulas. Instead of asking students to locate themselves within situations where texts have public or social functions, these courses fall back on typical essay assignments with vaguely identified hypothetical audiences. Giving students an understanding of the social nature of literacy should be the most basic task in teaching literacy. (TB)

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Texts Without Contexts: Ideological Distortion in Developmental Environments for Literacy

My earliest memory of reading in school takes me back to Mrs. Eversole's second-grade classroom in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1967. In small groups of perhaps six or eight, students would sit in a circle at the front of the classroom, taking turns reading a sentence at a time from our primer. Mostly I remember how tedious this experience was, listening as the other children read their sentences in a halting monotone while our teacher patiently corrected their mistakes. This was our reading lesson.

When it was my turn to read, I would milk my sentence for all it was worth, adding inflection and intonation and working that tiny piece of text for everything I could get out of it--for about ten seconds. Then it was someone else's turn, and I would fidget with boredom and speed on reading silently while the other children stumbled through their sentences. I was a self-satisfied little stinker then--my classmates must have considered me the worst sort of show-off--but now I wonder how the other kids felt about those reading lessons. Perhaps their monotone readings were a highly appropriate form of self-defense in this sort of literacy event.

Throughout elementary school, my own involvement as a reader became more and more profound, but it was deeply private. I

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devoured library books, living with their heroines, reading compulsively into the night, unwilling to sleep without knowing how a story ended. I remember many of these stories even now, but I remember little about reading in school. School and its textbooks bored me to distraction. I would skim my schoolbooks, remember almost nothing, and finally tuck a novel inside my text and absorb myself in a storyworld. I was lucky to be able to substitute another kind of reading for school reading and lucky to be able to get away with my subversive activity. Who could really be angry with a disobedient child whose most serious trangression was quietly reading a library book during math class? Other children were not so fortunate--not only did their favored activities get them in more trouble, but also many of those children probably failed to substitute some other kind of meaningful literacy involvement for the school literacy that failed so miserably to engage us.

My own early literacy experiences were inextricably tied to particular times and places, and to the ideologies mediated by familiar institutions--schools, libraries, home. Our and our students' literacy development is thus shaped by what some psychologists refer to as "developmental environments." In recent years, a number of developmental psychologists have argued that the nature and course of cognitive development are profoundly affected by their cultural and social settings. This paper sketches this theory and proposes a critique of literacy

education focused on the ideological and institutional environments of literacy development.

I'll begin with a remarkable definition of development borrowed from one of the pioneers of the environmental perspective, Urie Bronfenbrenner:

> Development is defined as the person's evolving conception of the ecological environment, and his[/her] relation to it, as well as the person's growing capacity to discover, sustain, or alter its properties. (9)

In Bronfenbrenner's view, then, development doesn't just happen automatically, but is a result of how an individual comes to terms with an environment. The nature of the environment shapes an individual's development, and, in turn, a person makes choices about how to interact with the environment, thus affecting the path of development. Bronfenbrenner proposed a new research paradigm in developmental psychology based on this theory of the developmental process.

Barbara Rogoff, working in the same vein more than a decade later, based her comprehensive cross-cultural study of children's cognitive development on the following principles:

> [T]hinking and learning are functional efforts by individuals to solve specific problems of importance in their culture, and . . . developmental courses vary in their goals rather than having a universal endpoint to which all should aspire. (116)

Rogoff's study develops a theory of "guided participation" in which cognitive development is shaped through social and pragmatic interaction. All cultures provide experiences of guided participation, yet what these experiences consist of, what

meaningful webs of skills, information, values, and so on are taught, vary dramatically.

This environmental perspective has arisen partly as a critique of theories based on developmental stages, particularly Piagetan theory. While stage theorists tend to assume a universal (and therefore normative) developmental path and endpoint, theorists like Bronfenbrenner and Rogoff disagree. Neither is interested in prescribing what development is "supposed" to look like or how people are supposed to turn out. Instead of assuming that all individuals go through the same sort of development regardless of where they go through it, Bronfenbrenner, Rogoff, and others insist that we must look at the settings in which development takes place in order to understand how development is shaped. In effect, they insist on a sort of figure-ground reversal in developmental theory, arguing that cultural contexts influence the development of cognitive structures, processes, and competencies (Gordon and Armour-Thomas 95).

Contextual theorists take a broad view of culture, in which schools, families, and other cultural units are implicated in larger cultural systems. Bronfenbrenner has proposed a structural model of the developmental environment, consisting of "nested" levels: immediate settings such as homes and classrooms, relations among immediate settings, such as institutions, and the larger sociocultural context (3-4). Other theorists offer variations of this structural perspective, such as micro- and macro-levels of culture--the levels of personal interaction and

of institutions. At the macro-level, institutions organize cognition by identifying appropriate objects of thought and action, establishing channels of action and transmission, designating standards for behavior and performance, and so forth. At the micro-level are interpersonal interactions in specific social settings in which modeling, learning, practice, feedback, dialogue, etc., play out the larger institutional arrangements (Gordon and Armour-Thomas 96-97).

These theorists do not tell us directly how these developmental concepts relate to literacy and writing. If there is some relationship between literacy development and cognitive development, as is widely assumed in our field, we must immediately ask how literacy is represented in the environments in which we learn literacy. In other words, literacy development is related to cognitive development to the extent and in the manner that the environment demands. I turn to this issue next.

This paper is driven by my sense that American schoolchildren and college students are widely taught, and taught according to, a dangerously distorted view of texts. At the ideological level, our culture has broadly conceived of literacy as radically separate from social contexts. In the environments of American schooling, literacy instruction, whether it focuses on writing or on reading, makes the text itself the point, rather than the social context in which a text takes on a meaningful public life. Even in my own relatively successful literacy history, my childhood involvement with texts was private and

personal, not social. Mrs. Eversole's reading lesson focused on decoding, not dialogue. No one suggested to me that texts were actually ways of participating in social realms until I reached graduate school, about twenty years after leaving Mrs. Eversole's second-grade class.

Innovations in scholarship during those twenty years have included whole-language theory and cooperative learning, powerful new paradigms which begin to address the problems I am concerned with here. However, these theories have failed to generate widespread pedagogical change. Despite the advance of social constructionist rhetoric, even college composition courses have largely failed to reconceive texts as integral to contexts. Courses that focus on "process"--prewriting, drafting, revising, editing--have simply adopted a new set of basics. Instead of teaching formulaic five-paragraph organization and rules of grammar and style, they teach a different, but still formulaic, set of steps to follow when writing. Other courses are more rhetorically based; they identify aims that may characterize writing in any number of situations. However, instead of asking students to locate themselves within situations where texts have public or social functions, and then read and write texts that have meaning there, these courses fall back on typical essay assignments with vaguely identified hypothetical audiences and no actual public status. Cultural studies courses also fail to confront the issue of how to bring student writing into realms of public discourse or social dialogue. The content of students' reading and writing may vary dramatically from more traditional

composition courses, but literate activity remains an enterprise limited to the classroom.

Thus literacy education in America largely takes for granted that the goals of reading and writing are the consumption and production of texts. We assume that teaching the operation involving the text is sufficient to the task of teaching literacy. I believe that we teach our students this at their peril, dramatically limiting their economic and political choices. These forms of literacy instruction disable rather than prepare students for meaningful participation in social and discursive arenas.

In Deborah Brandt's recent book, the formulation "literacy as involvement" seems to refer to the intersubjectivity within a text itself, in which readers and writers participate in exclusively textual events. However, Brandt shortshrifts the real living contexts of literacy, in which a "literacy of involvement" could describe how acts of literacy are woven into the social textures of our lives. As Mike Rose describes the scene of "Developmental English" in Lives on the Boundary (in a way that sounds remarkably like the education I endured in elementary school), he sketches in the missing public contexts of literacy: "It's a curriculum that rarely raises students' heads from the workbook page to consider the many uses of written language that surround them in their schools, jobs, and neighborhoods." The effect of such a curriculum, Rose says, is "a deep social and intellectual isolation from print" (211).

The goals of reading and writing as we know them as literate adults, citizens, workers, scholars, family members, and so on are multiple, local, historical, momentary, and inherently social--not textual--as we navigate among communities and negotiate issues of importance to us and others. Even as I write this paper, for this academic forum, for an audience of fellow scholars and teachers, my principal goal is not to produce a text, but to participate in a conversation, to create openings for new dialogue and questions, to position myself in a public discourse. These are social aims, and in order to achieve these aims I am required to produce a text, but the text is only a tool, a way of credentialing myself that allows me an entry point into a public dialogue.

In writing the conference paper, I am profoundly aware of the social context. I imagine the room; I imagine the papers being read, I imagine the audience. I think of this paper as part of my ongoing development in the larger professional context surrounding the conference as well--I direct a basic writing program, I'm working on a dissertation, eventually I'll be looking for a job, and my ideas about literacy are or will be part of the discourse of the profession and its institutions. The environment in which I write the paper, then, has multiple levels that create ripples of implications for how I might conceive my project and make my rhetorical choices. It gives me limits and constraints, it directs my attention, it gives me openings where I can try to contribute. This complicated, layered arena is my developmental environment.

But what happens in the classroom? The place where, in theory, we prepare students to understand and manage the kind of complex adult situation I've just sketched so briefly? In American schools, students learn that texts are artificial and specialized, separate from their lifeworlds. Students are carefully taught that texts are things, to be decoded according to certain procedures, or to be written according to certain rules and guidelines. They are not generally given opportunities to see how texts operate as integral elements of the social world; thus their developmental potential for active literacy is more suppressed than encouraged.

We are not surprised when students arrive in college composition classes with less than sophisticated ideas about the social nature of literacy. But do we do enough to create a developmental environment that represents the kinds of rich and complex literacies of adult life? I believe we do not. Perhaps we do our best work when we teach academic writing--it's the public realm that we know best, the air we breathe. But we know very little about our students' lives outside the classroom and the literate demands we might tap for writing assignments. We have little in the way of pedagogical scaffolding for helping students to understand the complex literate contexts outside the classroom--the arenas in which they will read and write for the rest of their lives. And we know little about finding or creating openings for our students' writing to make its way into public discourse. However, none of these challenges is insurmountable.

Giving our students an understanding of the social nature of literacy should be our most basic task in teaching literacy. Rose and Brandt argue eloquently that at-risk students need to understand the social contexts of literacy. But so do students who are skilled at school-based reading and writing but identify literacy outside of school as only a private experience. It is not fair to the middle-class child to be allowed to rest on her laurels in a quiet library retreat, thinking she has mastered literacy and therefore has learned what she needs for life. If literacy education--at any level--is to fulfill its promises of preparing students for greater economic choices as well as informed and critical citizenship, we must find ways to bring social domains into our classrooms, and to extend our students' acts of literacy outside of those walls.

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